



Office of The Attorney General  
**State of Connecticut**

**TESTIMONY OF  
ATTORNEY GENERAL RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS OF THE  
HOUSE ENERGY AND COMMERCE COMMITTEE  
JUNE 28, 2006**

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the critically important topic of making the Internet safe for children with an emphasis on social networking sites and the role of the ISPs

The Internet represents an enormous advance in technology and communications, providing ever-increasing benefits and significant gains in productivity for workers. It can bridge human differences and bring together people all over the world. Social networking sites, in particular, can offer opportunities for people to share information and ideas and form friendships.

The Internet has a dark side, susceptible to use by sexual predators in preying on unsuspecting, innocent children. Social networking sites provide fertile ground for sexual predators to peruse personal profiles while searching for their victims. Law enforcement authorities like my office have received numerous complaints from parents about questionable material -- including pornography -- on social networking sites. Even more alarming are sexual assaults on young girls, twelve and thirteen years old, who pose as older teenagers and unknowingly meet predators through networks such as MySpace, with tragic results.

I have been leading a multi-state working group consisting of 21 state attorneys general seeking important changes in the MySpace.com websites to provide children with greater protection from sexual predators and inappropriate material. While we seek voluntary measures from these websites, time is critical. So far, MySpace has taken baby steps, when major strides are needed. If the social networking sites fail to take specific steps recommended by the state attorneys general, Congress should act.

To adequately protect children, Congress should immediately consider:

- encouraging the restriction of all adult social networking sites to individuals 16 years and older while limiting teen access to sexually explicit materials on these sites;
- providing incentives for social networking sites to employ effective age verification methods;

- requiring all social networking sites to establish clear operating standards and employ an effective security system to monitor compliance with those standards and to work with law enforcement if potential criminal activity is detected;
- funding parent and child education programs through local law enforcement agencies;

Late last year, my office first received complaints from parents about MySpace.com , a social networking site with more than 85 million users. As you know, the site is designed to allow people to create their own personalized web pages, including children who have used the site to communicate with friends.

In reality, this site now exposes young people to a perilous cyberenvironment with people posting sexually explicit materials and looking for sexual relationships. Children can view pornographic images, links to x-rated websites, "clubs" involving adults seeking sexual encounters and webcam sex for sale offers.

Numerous sexual assaults on children in Connecticut have been directly linked to MySpace.com. In each instance, the predator established contact with the children through their MySpace.com pages.

MySpace has been engaged in constructive discussions with my office and the National Association of Attorneys General working group which I and North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper have led. In response to my concerns, MySpace has provided free software that parents can install to block their children's access to the site and hired a new security director --- but more needs to be done.

The first critical step must be keeping adults separate from children on any social networking site. For MySpace and similar social networking sites, no child under the age of sixteen years should be allowed access. Any social networking sites designed for children must provide heightened protection against access by sexual predators.

Second, all social networking sites -- regardless of whether they are designed for adults or children -- should employ effective age verification methods to ensure that children are not exposed to pornography, sexual predators and other inappropriate material. Adult age verification is neither novel nor cutting edge for the Internet. Many website operators have created systems to verify the user's age and identification. Under current case law, Congress may be limited in its ability to require age separation on these social networking sites. Therefore, Congress should be creative in designing incentives -- and perhaps disincentives -- for websites that fail to meet these standards.

Third, all social networking sites should fully disclose their operating standards -- who is allowed to establish and use profiles, how is the public allowed access to the site, what types of information are allowed or prohibited and so forth. These standards should be clearly and conspicuously disclosed on the website with easy ability to download and print the operating standards. The websites must devote adequate resources to effectively enforce violations of

their operating standards. Finally, each site should have an easily accessible filtering software that allows parents to block access to particular websites.

Fourth, parent and child education on website safety is absolutely necessary. In Connecticut, I have worked with local police chiefs in conducting community outreach programs. These programs have been well-received by parents. We need to do more. Congress should consider providing competitive grants and technical assistance, such as a best practices policy on internet safety, to local police departments and other law enforcement agencies.

Parents will always be the first -- and last -- line of defense, and should realize that responsibility. But MySpace must help them.

I commend the committee on their interest in this important subject. I look forward to working with the committee on creative solutions to protecting children and adults from Internet dangers.